

It sounds like a contradiction in terms but loneliness is catching. That's the conclusion of a detailed study into people's behaviour carried out by teams at three American universities.

Jack Izzard reports:

It's a medical **paradox**. People who feel lonely can spread the emotion to others - much like a virus. After **poring over data** collected from nearly 5,000 people, the researchers concluded that loneliness is more than just a personal feeling, it's **an infectious mental condition**. This was a statistical rather than medical study, so it doesn't explain how the contagion happens. But what it did find was that the friends of a person describing themselves as lonely were 52% more likely to become lonely themselves, and that their friends were **at an increased risk** too, even if they didn't know the lonely person.

The study's authors suggest this may be **down to** the way lonely people behave. **A tendency to be wary or mistrustful of** others can make their loneliness **a self-fulfilling prophecy**, as it may **drive friends away**. This much may seem obvious, but the study also hints that this behaviour can **rub off on** other people, **painting a rather bleak picture** of lonely people driving each other into ever greater isolation. Its advice to the lonely - surround yourself with a network of friends, as long as they're not lonely too.

Jack Izzard, BBC News, Paris

Vocabulary and definitions

paradox	not logical, not consistent or not possible
poring over data	examining or looking very carefully at the evidence or the information
an infectious mental condition	a way of feeling or thinking that can affect other people near you so that they have the same feelings too
at an increased risk	more likely to catch an illness or disease (or here, loneliness)
down to	because of
a tendency to be wary or mistrustful of	likely or inclined to be suspicious of
a self-fulfilling prophecy	something you do or say about yourself so often that it eventually makes something you say about yourself true (here, lonely people don't trust other people so they become more lonely, so they trust other people even less and so become even more lonely)
drive friends away	push friends away, reject them
rub off on	influence, have an effect through being close to someone or associating with them
painting a rather bleak picture	describing a situation or person as bad, depressing or sad

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